
The Role Of Central Asia In Prehistoric Appearance Of The Silk Road

The author of this study has explored how Central Asia played a major role in the prehistoric appearance of the Silk Road and its dispersal of foods through processes similar to modern globalization. The central question being explored asks how humanity has manipulated ecosystems so drastically that it has changed the way resources are distributed and how we communicate globally? To answer this question, archeological, genetic, and historical evidence is examined in certain geographic regions to trace various foods from their origins through Central Asia and the Silk Road. Through this evidence, he shows how the agricultural advancements implemented thousands of years ago still influence and affect our societies today. Robert Spengler is well suited to seek these answers as he has been trained and educated in this field extensively. His undergraduate studies included anthropology, art history, and philosophy. In his graduate studies, he obtained a Ph.D in anthropology, with a focus in archaeology. He has directed paleoethnobotanical studies across Asia, East Asia, Europe, and North America providing him with global knowledge and experience.

In the introduction, the thesis and justification for the study are stated in one sentence: "By dispersing plants and animals all around the world, humans have shaped global cuisines and agricultural practices" (6). The first few chapters are used to explain how up until now, there was little to be known about the Silk Road and how the plants, animals, and grains that travelled along it were able to impact ecosystems globally. Spengler is able to illustrate different ways plants were transported as it relates to the cultural, economic, and social applications of food and the appreciation of it around the world today. Newly discovered archeological evidence has provided insight into the origins of the Silk Road, suggesting that it began around the second or third millennia. The Silk Road was the interconnecting medium of spreading social ideas and technologies into various geographical locations. Though silk was not the main asset, merchants and herders were able to utilize the Silk Road to disperse a number of plants and animals into new areas. The people of Central Asia travelled through diverse conditions to spread knowledge, agricultural technology and resources to various continents. The main center of communication on the Silk Road included cities in Central Asia, like Bukhara and Khiva. There were also modern traces of grains originating from Central Asia that made its way into different parts of Europe, including Germany (109). The Silk Road symbolizes worldwide integration and as time has gone by, people have used these crops in their own ways to represent their culture on a global level. Spengler suggests that regional cuisines have become globalized, stating, "rice would become one of the most important grains in the Islamic World; the apple would become a symbol of America; and the peach would become an emblem of the US state of Georgia." (6). The cuisines that we value today embody the importance of origin behind each and every culture.

Spengler, along with many other prehistoric researchers, found that millets and rice were two of the most reliant grains. Though millet is not as relevant to us today, it became increasingly popular in the ancient world after being discovered in the third millennium. According to the book, "the millets' short growing season, drought tolerance, and preference for warm conditions make them well suited for growing as a summer crop in a crop rotation" (78). This archeological evidence shows how there was a boom in cultural expansion that triggered a rise

in agricultural development, as more and more plants began to be domesticated around the world. During the last millennium, two rice crop rotations had a universal effect in many regions of China and eventually spread across other regions of Asia. These discoveries caused a decline in the desire for millets. In the early 1900s, one researcher by the name of Berthold Laufer claimed that, “with the development of irrigation systems after the Muslim conquests in the early seventh century, ‘rice early came to be grown in the Islamic world almost wherever there was water enough to irrigate it’” (102). Rice is a fundamental ingredient in many Arab, Chinese, and Turkish cuisines today, and the significance dates back to the middle ages. Improvement in agricultural systems allowed for a wider variety of diets in cultures around the world. Spengler uses the origins of each crop to tell a story and demonstrate the importance behind several cuisines, something many people take for granted in modern times.

By examining Spengler’s book alongside *Guns, Germs, and Steel* by Jared Diamond, we can see that Diamond takes more of a scientific approach to the history of the world and how certain geographic areas are more resourceful. He sets out to show how guns, germs, and steel were the main advantages that led to certain nations having more power over others. Diamond suggests that the geographic regions located directly on the East-West axis automatically benefited from the climate, as it would make for more favorable agriculture. With that being said, he also maintained the idea that these nations would not be able to spread their success to others that were less fortunate. Spengler’s stance on this topic differs as he believed that the plants, fruit, and grains that come from the more fortunate regions of Asia could be spread through the Silk Road to improve the lives of people all around the world. Spengler subscribes to an ideological commitment throughout *Fruit from the Sands* as many of the topics discussed in it are about the developments of culture. There is a great amount of cultural ideas considered in the text and Spengler uses his research findings to support each one. I recommend this book as a requirement to anyone taking an Asian Studies course. The research that is presented in this book provides readers with information about the heritage of our food and where it comes from, so I would also recommend this book to the general public. It has paved the way for readers to discover the origins of the food they eat, no matter what part of the world they are in. It is full of rich history and explains how textures, flavors, and colors have evolved as well as the agriculture and diverse cultural values behind it.